

# **STATEMENT ON AFGHANISTAN**

Before the Sub-Committee on Near Eastern and South  
Asian Affairs, Committee on Foreign Relations,  
United States Senate.

By

Peter Tomsen, Professor of International Studies and  
Programs, University of Nebraska at Omaha, former  
Ambassador and Special Envoy to the Afghan Resistance.

July 20, 2000

## UNTYING THE AFGHAN KNOT

Mr. Chairman, I wish to thank you and your sub-committee for the invitation to testify before you today. The influence of Afghanistan on critical United States interests in the Central-South Asian region and globally has for too long been underestimated. The current American policy toward Afghanistan and the Taliban has not and cannot advance these interests. I congratulate you for organizing today's hearing to explore a more effective American approach to breaking the bloody stalemate in Afghanistan.

During my thirty-three years in the American Foreign Service, preceded by two years as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Nepal, I served as a United States Ambassador to a country -- Armenia -- and as an American Ambassador and Presidential Special Envoy to a cause -- the quest for peace and freedom in Afghanistan. Now retired, I retain a deep interest in that cause.

Mr. Chairman, among the countless Afghan parables is one that states: "As long as the root touches the water, there is hope." Afghans still hope for peace, despite their predicament. No nation since perhaps the Germans during the devastating Thirty Years War have suffered proportionally and continuously such death and destruction over decades. The Soviet invasion and occupation killed two million Afghans, ripped apart the delicate socio-political fabric and traditional base of Afghanistan, shattered the economic structure, sewed over ten million mines, drove five million Afghans into Pakistan and Iran, destroyed much of the centuries-old underground irrigation system and created the Muslim extremist foothold in Afghanistan which has fueled the second round of warfare in Afghanistan continuing today.

The extremist network created during the nine year Afghan-Soviet war has subjected Afghanistan to another form of tyranny every bit as pernicious as the bloody string of Soviet-supported communist rulers during the 1980's. The Pakistani military's Interservices Intelligence Directorate (ISI), Pakistani radical Muslim parties, Saudi and other Arab extremists, including Osama bin Ladin, and Afghanistan's own Islamist elements (Hekmatyar, Rabbani, Sayyaf, and the Taliban) have exploited the country as a springboard for exporting terrorism, drugs and Muslim extremism through Eurasia, from Xinjiang to Chechnya, Kashmir to Karachi.

Tribal leaders in Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province earlier this year warned the Pakistani Tehrik-e-Taliban ("Taliban Movement") against forcing Talibanization in their tribal areas. Sunni fanatics recently assassinated fourteen more Shia in Karachi. Uzbek customs officials seized a shipment of radioactive material in May. Press reports indicate the shipment was destined for Taliban-held areas in Afghanistan where it would be converted into powerful radiation bombs for use by international terrorists based in Afghanistan.

Terrorist operations, massive drug production and the ebb and flow of fighting in Afghanistan is now accompanied by destructive drought which is drying wells, denying moisture to crops and forcing the premature slaughter of livestock. There are reports of large-scale locust attacks. Criminal activity and banditry in urban and rural areas is on the rise as the Taliban grip weakens in Afghanistan. Columbia-style murderous, narco-terrorist syndicates with international tentacles are emerging. Afghans, desperate for peace, ask if their nightmare will ever end.

As the Afghan proverb tells, however, there **is** hope. Modern history records examples of how proud, small nations, particularly those with their own history, culture and religion, resist subjugation. Afghans see their history as a united nation going back to the mid-eighteenth century. As practiced, the Afghan national identity is a unique, holistic blend of Islam, tribal codes of conduct, and Afghan nationalism, north and south, east and west. Afghanistan's moderate Islam rejects the Taliban-style radical Deobandi, Wahabbi, and Ikhwani influences imported from Pakistan, the Persian Gulf, and the Middle East as turmoil enveloped the country.

There are other reasons for hope.

The Taliban is in decline. It will probably be driven from Kabul by the end of the year.

Unlike in the Balkans, no Afghan ethnic group inside Afghanistan has separatist aspirations. Pashtuns do not want to join Pakistan; Tajiks likewise prefer their Afghan moorings to union with Tajikistan; Afghanistan's Shia population has shown no inclination to seek association with Iran.

It is also potentially helpful that each of the permanent members of the UN Security Council has an interest in seeing a legitimate regime in Kabul, accepted by most Afghans as chosen by Afghans, in an Afghan deliberative process not imposed from the outside; a regime which focuses on Afghanistan's massive internal economic problems; one prepared to work with Afghanistan's neighbors and the international community to break the utilization of Afghan soil by terrorists, to phase out opium production, and reap the substantial economic gains from the revival of ancient trade and transport corridors transiting Afghanistan. The Taliban fail in all of these categories.

A stable Afghanistan offering a crossroads for regional and global commerce along a sweeping north-south and east-west axis would prove an economic boon to each of Afghanistan's neighbors in the region, as well as to Afghanistan itself.

Islamabad would benefit the most. Pakistan cannot transit Afghanistan to market its products in Central Asia, the Caspian Basin and China while instability persists in Afghanistan.

Pakistan has legitimate interests in Afghanistan. They do not, however, extend to selecting those who rule in Kabul. Islamabad's sponsorship of the Taliban will only further advance the economic and social decay underway in Pakistan itself. Pakistan's continuing support for the Taliban will also deepen its political isolation in the region and in the international community.

### **Afghan Views of Outside Interference**

Neither Pakistani nor Iranian attempts to mediate the Afghan dispute can succeed. The period since the Soviet pullout is littered with the carcasses of Islamabad initiated "peace" initiatives for Afghanistan. These include the Afghan Interim Government in 1988, the 1992 Islamabad Accord, and then the Taliban in the mid-1990's. Pakistan has consistently sought to put Afghan Muslim extremists in Kabul, much like the Soviets attempted to place their own asset, the Afghan communists, in Kabul. Afghans are now thoroughly suspicious of any outside mediation, most notably initiatives from Islamabad and Tehran. Their cynicism extends as well to Moscow and Riyadh.

Many Afghans also worry that Russian leaders may emulate the Soviet era tendency to reach for military and intelligence levers in dealing with the complex Afghan issue. In 1979, the Soviet Politburo took that path, disregarding the advice of many in Soviet foreign policy and think tank positions who were knowledgeable about Afghanistan. Today, powerful elements in the Russian military and intelligence establishment may play a spoiler role by arguing against an internationally assisted Afghanistan settlement process, favoring instead a climate of confrontation along the Amu Darya to buttress Moscow as a "protector" of the Central Asian states against the Muslim extremist threat from Afghanistan. Russian stoking of conflict in Moldova and

the Caucasus has had a similar objective of drawing the former Soviet republics back under Russia's control. Conversely, Moscow's cooperation in an internationally assisted Afghanistan settlement could be an important precedent for further Russian-Western collaboration to resolve other conflicts smoldering across Eurasia.

Afghans have become disillusioned with Washington's disengagement from Afghanistan, as the United States sources out its policy to others. This disengagement was illustrated again when the State Department repeated U.S. support for Pakistani and Iranian settlement initiatives for Afghanistan. These initiatives have no chance of succeeding. They will be rejected by Afghans as further destructive Iranian and Pakistani attempts to champion their favored extremist elements in Afghan internal affairs. Ongoing Iranian and Pakistani strategic competition in Afghanistan also dooms these outside interventions to failure.

### **Formulating an effective American Policy**

United States policy toward Afghanistan and the region will be critical to the success of an Afghan peace process. The principal problem is that there is not, and has not been, an American policy toward Afghanistan since the 1992 collapse of the communist regime in Kabul. It was only after the 1998 Osama bin Ladin-instigated bombings of U.S. embassies in Africa that U.S. policy on Afghanistan began to stir. The resultant, single-minded "get bin Ladin" approach, however, has missed the point. Seizing one terrorist, however odious, does not address the broad and important U.S. interests at stake in Afghanistan. A comprehensive American policy is required in order to: stem international terrorism; reverse soaring Afghan narcotics production; remove the increasingly dangerous international Islamist network using Afghanistan as an operational base; lay the basis for revival of Eurasian trade routes through Afghanistan; and help Afghans rebuild their nation after over two decades of Soviet and Islamist generated death and destruction.

The Clinton administration over the past seven years has squandered the opportunity to end the Afghan conflict. Washington's vapid approach has assumed that there is no cost to American disengagement. But there are costs. They are already high. They will only increase should American inaction continue.

President Clinton, during his April South Asia visit, reflected the lack of an effective United States policy on Afghanistan. He mentioned Afghanistan in public but once, and that was in the form of another "get bin Ladin" reference during his meeting with Pakistan Chief Executive Musharraf. President Clinton's trip could have been used to propose a major initiative on Afghanistan, laying out a broad U.S. policy responding to the multiple U.S. interests in Afghanistan.

Whether it is in this Administration or the next one, an effective American policy on Afghanistan will need to fit into a broader regional policy framework: helping Pakistan out of its present mess; defusing Indo-Pakistani tensions; pursuing rapprochement with Iran; strengthening the democratic and economic transition process in Russia and Central Asia; combating the threat to regional and global stability posed by Afghanistan-sourced drugs and terrorism; unleashing the regional economic benefits that peace in Afghanistan would bring to South Asia, Iran, Russia, China, and the new Central Asian Republics; and creating an area for fruitful U.S. cooperation with Japan and China.

A U.S. diplomatic push on Afghanistan should best work indirectly through the UN Security Council, which has the legitimate mandate under the UN Charter to prevent threats to peace and security. The U.S. could be the sparkplug for UN Security Council action to convene a major international conference to focus exclusively on Afghanistan. The main goals of the conference should include a formal treaty formally recognizing Afghanistan's neutrality and sovereignty, such as was done for Austria in the 1955 Austrian State Treaty. The conference and its attendant documents could further:

- Bind outside governments and entities not to provide the Afghan belligerents with weapons or other war-making material, including aviation fuel.

- Make clear that governments or entities which persist in supplying the Afghan belligerents with war-making potential would be sanctioned.
- Register pledges of support for Afghanistan's reconstruction. The UN would coordinate the international assistance effort.
- Designate the UN Secretary General's Special Envoy on Afghanistan as the only outside mediator for the Afghan settlement processes.
- Prohibit separate, direct mediation or lobbying by foreign governments or regional organizations with the Afghan factions. Instead, foreign governments would provide their insights directly to the United Nations mediation initiative.
- Provide incentives to discourage Pakistan from shifting its support to yet another mix of Afghan extremists in Kabul as the Taliban disintegrate.

### **International Coordination**

Active support for a Security Council initiative on Afghanistan by Afghanistan's neighbors, especially Pakistan, will be essential to its success. Positive incentives for Pakistan's cooperation will be important to counter internal Pakistani opposition from Muslim extremist elements in Pakistani military and political circles. Incentives for a constructive Pakistani approach would include Pakistan's desperately needed access to Eurasian markets and trade routes through a peaceful Afghanistan. The international conference could also offer Pakistan a share of the international assistance which would accompany an Afghanistan settlement.

Pakistan's reasonable strategic concern about the revival of the two front security challenge it experienced for most of its post-independence period must also be addressed. Islamabad's sponsorship of a radical Islamic government in Kabul has geo-political origins with offensive and defensive qualities -- offensive in creating "Islamic depth" against India; defensive in preventing New Delhi and Moscow from once more making Afghanistan the upper lip of a strategic vise on Pakistan.

An international conference on Afghanistan could include a declaration patterned on the 1975 Helsinki Accords formally recognizing the sanctity of Afghanistan's pre-Soviet invasion frontiers, including the Afghanistan-Pakistan border area. The

conference might urge that the legitimate regime in Kabul emerging from a settlement process work with Pakistan to include a bilateral border agreement, thus setting aside the century-old controversy over the 1893 Durand Line. The conference could propose that UN or International Court of Justice mediation be made available to assist Pakistan-Afghanistan bilateral border negotiations.

An international conference could be the vehicle to commit India, Russia, Iran, as well as Pakistan to a broader, authoritative international undertaking to restrain themselves from manipulating Afghanistan to serve their separate strategic goals in Central Asia. An international understanding respecting Afghanistan's neutrality, sovereignty and frontiers would be a form of collective security bolstering Afghan stability at the center of the Eurasian land mass. No single major power would achieve one hundred percent of its goals, as the West and Soviet Union accepted when they removed their occupation forces from Austria in 1955. All would benefit from the abandoning of the zero-sum geo-political competition by outside powers in Afghanistan, that has led to the current destructive stalemate in which none of Afghanistan's competing neighbors can succeed in maintaining its favored Afghan in Kabul. All will continue to suffer from the stalemate of death, destruction, and chaos on their borders. A forceful American and United Nations Security Council Initiative from outside the region could break the impasse. As the noted Pakistani specialist on Afghanistan, respected journalist Ahmed Rashid has written, "Until the United States demonstrates that it has the determination to mobilize an international effort for ending outside interference, Afghanistan's chaos will only spread".

### **Good Timing for Domestic Afghan Agreement**

An international conference projecting international support for Afghanistan's neutrality and sovereignty would give impetus to the internal Afghan settlement process which has begun to generate momentum. The Taliban's decline is assisting this welcome

trend. Intangible as well as tangible elements are steadily eroding the Taliban's base of support, including in the southern Pashtun belt. A successful international conference could indirectly assist Afghans to fill the vacuum left by the Taliban's demise, discourage Pakistan from sponsoring yet another radical Muslim option to replace the Taliban, provide "cover" to Pakistan's leaders to end Islamabad's failed course in Afghanistan and regain its image as a constructive partner in the international community.

The most likely immediate scenario following the breakup of the Taliban would be the re-emergence of local military commanders, tribal and clan leaders in previous Taliban areas. Some combination, perhaps including former Taliban elements, would then take over Kabul. A critical issue at this point would be whether those controlling Kabul will be ready to support a genuine Afghan political settlement process.

The Northern Alliance (or United Front) leader Ahmed Shah Masood's actions would be important while Taliban control in the southern Pashtun belt continues to weaken. By pushing toward Kabul, he would re-unite Pashtun opposition against himself. More months if not years of warfare would follow. Masood would again find himself constantly beleaguered, faced with enemies from the east, south, and west seeking to dislodge him from the capital. He could instead announce his support for a peace process, representing all Afghan groups, while eschewing unilateral military advantage. In addition to Masood, other major commanders in Afghanistan, Pashtun and non-Pashtuns, would need to join in backing the political process, restraining themselves militarily.

The great majority of Afghans have concluded that a peace process must include the convening of a large gathering of Afghans, which fairly represents Afghanistan's major groups and regions. Such meetings -- termed Loya Jirgas or "Grand Assemblies" in Afghan history -- have chosen leaders and set a direction for the country before in Afghan history. The Loya Jirga movement revolving around Ex-monarch Zahir Shah is one -- but not the only -- possible catalyst to this end. The new group in Kabul replacing

the Taliban could turn out to be a supporter of a representative Loya Jirga if it opts for a settlement process and resists the temptation to become the next transitory ruler in Kabul.

In sum, Mr. Chairman, my judgement is that it is useless to expect good results from negotiations with the rigid, orthodox, anti-western Taliban. The Taliban are active partners in the international extremist network threatening the region and beyond. We should proceed in a way that accelerates the Taliban's deteriorating position in Afghanistan. Our policy should discreetly assist the intra-Afghan dialogue to create a legitimate non-Taliban regime in Afghanistan, missing since the early 1970's. That regime, I believe, could lead Afghanistan back to playing a respectable role in the international community, as it did before the Soviet invasion. Diplomatically, the United States should help put together an international arrangement which will assist the return to peace in Afghanistan and ensure stability in central Eurasia for the upcoming decades.

Afghans will benefit the most from the resulting chance for peace. So will all of Afghanistan's neighbors and the broader Central-South Asian region generally.

### **What Can Congress Do?**

A lot. We cannot expect an effective foreign policy on Afghanistan before this Administration ends. Whichever party wins in November, it will take at least a year for the next administration to establish the essential analytical framework and policy approach needed to satisfy U.S. interests in Afghanistan and the region. In the mid-1980's Congress seized the initiative and legislated a more invigorated American approach on Afghanistan. You are really the only hope for policy change as we proceed from one administration to the next.

My suggestion is that you consider legislation realizing the following objectives:

- As you did in 1988, a presidential election year, adopt legislation re-establishing the position of an American Special Envoy on Afghanistan with

the rank of Ambassador. A high level Special Envoy specifically dealing with Afghanistan would reverse the image of American disengagement from Afghanistan. It will compensate for the lack of an American ambassador in Kabul. The envoy would coordinate a fresh American approach on Afghanistan, working inter-agency, with the Congress, Afghans and foreign governments.

- Adopt legislation re-establishing a direct United States humanitarian assistance program for Afghanistan. The level could begin at ten million dollars or even less. It should be managed from USAID offices in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, as well as from Peshawar, Pakistan to ensure that American aid goes to non-Taliban areas.

Mr. Chairman, these two steps would project to Afghans, as well as to outside powers involved in Afghanistan, that the United States is finally giving a higher priority to Afghanistan through an effective policy. As in the mid-1980's, you will face resistance from the bureaucracy in passing legislation on these two issues. As we go from this administration to the next one, however, congressional action is really the only alternative for shifting our policy to a course that will generate tangible results for American interests in Afghanistan and the region.

- 
-